

NEWS

From the Office of

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Wrightwood CERT and Emergency Radio Teams Leap Into Action

WRIGHTWOOD - When several High Desert communities lost phone communications on the evening of Monday, August 25, teams of Wrightwood residents sprang into action, employing techniques they had learned during training sessions to become skilled members of Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). For several hours, the public had no phone or 911 service due to an outage of all telephone landlines and cell phones.

Capt. Steve Roeber, a paramedic with San Bernardino County Fire Station 101 in Wrightwood, recognized that residents were without 911 service during a time that the Fire Station was experiencing an unusually high call volume, and asked CERT leaders to activate their teams. As Wrightwood is vulnerable to isolation during a disaster, and firefighters stationed there also have responsibilities to neighboring communities, many residents have risen to the challenge of preparing themselves and their communities for emergency situations by undergoing CERT training and forming an extensive amateur radio communication network.

CERT teams immediately launched an organized system of communications. Wrightwood CERT groups have set up divisions throughout the community with Division Supervisors. On Monday evening, team members donned the trademark green CERT vests and helmets and walked their divisions with handheld communications, ready to assist citizens in need of help. The ground teams communicated with the Division Supervisors, who communicated with the Wrightwood Communications Group's Ham Radio Operations Center.

The Wrightwood Communications Group includes more than two hundred members and participants both in Wrightwood and in other communities within radio range.

Mobile HAM operators were dispatched in vehicles, and at Station 101, which was also affected by the outages, to further coordinate activities as needed. The Wrightwood base was also in communication with the San Bernardino County Emergency Operations Center personnel.

Wrightwood CERT leaders kept fire officials informed of their activities and provided a communication network that offered a backup system to the failed phone lines. Capt. Roeber called it an extremely positive experience. "This was a fine example of a positive and coordinated effort by the CERT Team here in the Wrightwood area," Roeber said. "It appears they will be of great assistance in the future for local emergency and disaster situations the community will encounter."

The Wrightwood Radio Group also activated its low-power AM radio station, which broadcasted emergency information on AM 1610. The station, which was purchased with funds secured by Supervisor Mitzelfelt earlier this year, broadcasts information to residents within a three to five-mile radius around Wrightwood.

A message began broadcasting on the radio station Monday within an hour of the phone outage. The message informed residents of the outage and gave instructions on how to obtain emergency assistance.

The following day, August 26, the teams were again called into action due to a power outage that lasted from late morning until evening.

During the power outage, CERT teams went door-to-door and found two residents in need of medical assistance.

Denise Benson, Division Manager of the San Bernardino County Fire Department Office of Emergency Services, which coordinates the CERT training, said this underscores the importance of residents becoming involved in their communities through organizations like CERT and Citizens' Corps. "No one knows where or when disaster will strike," she said. "The possibility exists that emergency responders may not be able to respond for hours or even days, and that possibility must galvanize residents to prepare themselves and their communities."

CERT classes include training for fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. They are funded by federal grant dollars and are free for residents. Residents in incorporated areas may learn more about CERT teams by contacting their city or town, and residents in unincorporated areas can call the County CERT coordinator at (909) 356-3998.